

## **Historic, Archive Document**

Do not assume content reflects current scientific knowledge, policies, or practices.



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE  
AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH SERVICE  
FARM ECONOMICS RESEARCH DIVISION

Discussion of "Sociological Research and The Low-Income Farm Problem,"  
by A. Lee Coleman

by

W. E. Hendrix, Agricultural Economist

Annual meeting of the Association of Southern Agricultural Workers,  
Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology Section, Birmingham, Alabama,  
February 5, 1957

Professor Coleman has presented an interesting and comprehensive statement of the low-income farm problem, has indicated some promising lines of sociological research directed toward its solution, and has outlined a general orientation type of study that may both service rural-development programs and provide a benchmark for their evaluation. However, only one who knows both the concepts and theory, or methodology, of sociology and the major characteristics of the low-income farm problem could adequately evaluate Dr. Coleman's research proposals. As I am not a sociologist, I shall assume that the researches he has outlined would be sociological and that sociologists can help to break through such obstacles to raising the income of low-income people as those of immobility and high birthrates, communication impediments, and individual and community inertia. I shall briefly examine the distinctions that Dr. Coleman has made, at least implicitly, as between the roles of economists and those of sociologists in research on low-income farms. I am interested, too, in how research in these two disciplines may be related, and especially in how economists can more effectively use new sociological findings in economic analyses.

For these purposes, we need a definition of the two disciplines that will help to distinguish our respective fields. Dr. Coleman has discussed, but has not defined, the sociological approach. Hence, what he means by the sociological approach must be inferred. The best key to what he means is probably that found in his reference to a "look at the problem in terms of low-income people" as predominantly that of sociology, while a look at the problem in terms of low-production farms is considered to be economics. As thus implied, he makes the difference between our respective fields turn in large measure upon differences in the kinds of data with which we work. Specifically, data on people, according to Dr. Coleman, are sociological, whereas data on land and other physical things as capital and on people as sources of marketable labor services are economic. Although these distinctions may be generally valid, the economist more often distinguishes his field, not by the kinds of data he uses, but by the uses he makes of the data - by the concepts and analytical tools he applies to the data. These concepts are all parts of a system of mutually interrelated concepts which together compose a model or theory of an exchange economy - a model that economists use not as a description of any actual economic system but as an analytical tool for exploring possible solutions of problems with special attention to means - consequence relationships bearing upon income and price.

Most things, whether tangible or intangible, that men value to the extent that their behavior is significantly affected by them, can be related to income and prices, either directly or indirectly. For example, the differential between what some low-income farm families earn in eastern Kentucky and what they might be earning in Louisville or Cincinnati may simply be the price they are choosing to pay, or the income they are choosing to forego, to live where they can hunt and fish or to live as have their parents ahead of them. It is a price that economists can help to identify and to measure, given the underlying values and their meaning for production and employment preferences.

There is nothing in our economic calculus, though, that will tell us what the low-income farm people's values and underlying motivations are, nor how these emerge and change. Sociologists and psychologists may be able to develop more precise methods of identifying motives and values and of indicating how they affect production and employment decisions. But in this, knowledge of the low-income people's production and employment opportunities and knowledge of what they know about such opportunities would seem essential, lest what is identified as noneconomic values be a mistaken identification of their lack of attainable production and employment opportunities that are better than those they have chosen. That is, until one has carefully weighed the production and employment opportunities open to low-income farm people, balancing the requirements of these opportunities (in terms of capital, new technical knowledge and skills, new forms of business enterprises to service such adjustments, cultural adaptations, changes in trade and employment practices in the nonfarm economy, and so on) against the resources (including organizational ability) of low-income people, he can hardly ascribe their low incomes to nonpecuniary motives or to a never-do-well character. Hence, even the study of nonpecuniary motives and values, which Dr. Coleman regards more as the province of sociology than of economics, affords good opportunity for profitable division of labor between sociology and economics and other social science disciplines in the course of which workers in each of these disciplines may profitably use the findings of the others as data for their respective researches.

The low-income farm problem is one that I hope we do not split up along our respective subject matter lines and then adopt a "dog-in-the-manger" attitude toward phases that fall predominantly in our own special field. For this problem, like any other important social problem, has many facets, to each of which each of several disciplines can make its own unique contribution. None of these facets in all of its ramifications, can be wholly contained within the forms and molds of any one discipline - indeed, probably not in those of all our disciplines taken together. Yet each of several disciplines can contribute in its own unique way to a better understanding of the problem and, in turn, to its solution.

Without knowing what sociologists can hope to accomplish along the specific lines that Dr. Coleman has indicated, it is obvious to anyone who is familiar with low-income farm people and with low-income farm areas that he has at least indicated some very important problems. I am interested especially in the problems of group relationships as a facet of the low-income farm problem and in the significance of these relationships for our economic inquiries. Too often, economists have assured that each farmer is an autonomous individual, whereas in fact, most are members of a family, of kinship and neighborhood groups, and of many other communities of interest



928866

which condition their interests and their responses to the economic opportunities open to them. I hope that sociologists will be able to show us how these group relationships affect behavioral patterns and that they can provide us new valuable insights into organizational aspects of the low-income farm problem.

Because of time limitations Dr. Coleman did not indicate in detail the direction of such studies or the concepts applicable to them. I have wondered, however, whether some such concept as that of social (or group) dynamics, may not have large relevance here. Take the problem of identifying community leaders, for example. Do new leaders and even new groups emerge under the stress of new problems or awareness of new opportunities? Are present leaders in their roles because of community acceptance of a romanticised version of the status quo as its ideal and because of the identity of these persons with the origin or preservation of this ideal? Can these leaders be expected to provide the leadership needed to cope with new problems, or with old problems newly discovered? Or will these result in, or require, the emergence of new leaders? If the latter, will not there be rivalry for a period of time between the old and the emerging new group lines and leaders, with the former obstructing and, in some instances thwarting, the needed new forms of group action? For these kinds of reasons, are possible solutions of such problems as that of low incomes likely to break down in the social processes through which they must be developed and implemented?

Answers to questions of this kind would add immensely to our knowledge of the nature of the low-income farm problem. They would help us to judge better whether low incomes persist because of imperfections in the functioning of labor and capital markets, or because of the values of individual low-income people, or because the problem is also in large measure one of group (or social) valuation and organization amidst genuine conflicts of interest.

In conclusion, Dr. Coleman's general statement of the low-income problem is comprehensive enough to engage the best efforts of researchers in many subject-matter fields. On many phases of the low-income farm problem, sociologists and economists may need to work closely together from the inception of their researches. However, effective cooperation in research may also be achieved when researchers in each of several disciplines work independently, each exploring the problem with his own research tools or looking at it from his own viewpoint, but cognizant of and making use of new knowledge being added by other disciplines.

In many respects, the low-income farm problem has its parallel in some important physical science problems. A notable example is the field of cancer research. There, too, each of several disciplines offers promise of its own unique contribution. None has yet found a fully satisfactory solution of the problem but each has added to a better comprehension of it. Until a fully satisfactory solution is developed, no discipline can afford to claim the cancer-research field as wholly its own. Rather, each needs the new insights into the nature of the problem that only other disciplines than its own can possibly provide.

So it is with our researches into the low-income farm problem. The sociological researches that Dr. Coleman has outlined will no doubt add much to our knowledge of the low-income farm problem. Some of this will be knowledge that agricultural economists do not have the tools to develop but which we can and must incorporate into economic analyses of the problem in a continuum of cooperation with sociologists and others, in which we, too, will make our own unique contribution.

